

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN AFFLICTING HIS PEOPLE

Charles Bridges (1794-1869)

"I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me"—Psalm 119:75.

THIS is the Christian's acknowledgment—fully satisfied with the dispensation of God. This is his confidence; so invigorating to his own soul; so cheering to the church. The Lord's dealings are called *his judgments*, not as having judicial curses, but as the acts of his justice in the chastening of sin. "For the time *is come* that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if *it first begin* at us, what shall the end *be* of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1Pe 4:17). Perhaps also; as the administration of His wise judgments in their measure and application. "O LORD, correct me, but with judgment; not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing" (Jer 10:24). But here is not only the confession of the Lord's general judgment, but of His especial *faithfulness* to himself. And this he knew; not from the dictates of the flesh (which would have given a contrary verdict), but from the testimony of the word, and the witness of his own experience. "*He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he*" (Deu 32:4). "Righteous *art* thou, O LORD, and upright are thy judgments" (Psa 119:137). "The LORD *is* righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works" (Psa 145:17). It could not be doubted, much less denied.

The Christian says again, "*I know, O Lord, that Thy rules of proceeding are agreeable to Thy perfect justice and wisdom; and I am equally satisfied, that the afflictions that Thou hast laid upon me from time to time, are only to fulfil Thy gracious and faithful promise of making me eternally happy in Thyself.*" Blessed fruit of affliction! when we can thus "see the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy," that his "thoughts towards us are thoughts of peace, and not of evil!" (Jam 5:11; Jer 29:11). "The patience and faith of the saints" teach this difficult but most consoling lesson, in deciphering the mysterious lines in God's *providence and faithfulness*.

The child of God under the severest chastisement must acknowledge justice. Our gracious reward is always more: our "punishment always less, than our iniquities deserve." (Ezr 9:13, Comp. Job 11:6). "Wherefore should a living man complain?" (Lam 3:39). In trouble he is indeed! but not in hell. If he complain, let it be of none but himself, and his own wayward choice. *I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right,* and who can doubt the wisdom? Who would charge the operator with cruelty, in cutting out the proud flesh, that was bringing death upon the

man? Who would not acknowledge the *right judgment* of his piercing work? Thus, when the Lord's painful work separates us from our sin, weans us from the world, and brings us nearer to Himself, what remains for us, but thankfully to acknowledge His righteousness and truth? Unbelief is put to rebuke; and we, if we have indulged suspicion "that God hath forgotten to be gracious," must confess, "This is our infirmity" (Psa 77:7-10).

This assurance of the Lord's perfect justice, wisdom, and intimate knowledge of our respective cases, leads us to yield to His appointments in dutiful silence. Thus Aaron, under his most afflictive domestic calamity, "held his peace" (Lev 10:1-3). Job under a similar dispensation was enabled to say—"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord!" (Job 1:21, compare 2:10). Eli's language in the same trial was, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good" (1Sa 3:18). David hushed his impatient spirit—"I was dumb; I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it." And when Shimei cursed him, he said, "Let him alone; let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him" (Psa 39:9; 2Sa 16:11-12). The Shunamite, in the meek resignation of faith, acknowledged—"It is well" (2Ki 4:26). Hezekiah kissed the rod, while it was smiting him to the dust: Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken" (Isa 39:8). Thus uniform is the language of the Lord's people under chastisement. *I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right.*

But the confession of justice may be mere natural conviction. "And Pharaoh sent, and called for Moses and Aaron, and said unto them, I have sinned this time: the LORD is righteous, and I and my people are wicked" (Exo 9:27; compare Jdg 1:7; 2Ch 12:6). Faith goes further, and speaks of faithfulness. David not only acknowledges God's right to deal with him as He saw fit, and even His wisdom in dealing with him as He actually had done, but His *faithfulness in afflicting*—not His faithfulness *though* He afflicted—but *in* afflicting him; not as if it were inconsistent with His love, but as the very fruit of His love. It is not enough to justify God. What abundant cause is there to praise Him! It is not enough to forbear to murmur. How exciting is the display of *God's faithfulness and love!* Yes, the trials appointed for us are none else than the faithful performance of His everlasting engagements. And to this cause we may always trace (and it is our privilege to believe it, where we cannot visibly trace it) the reason of much that is painful to the flesh. "Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end" (Deut 8:16). Let us only mark its gracious effects in our restoration-instruction (Psa 119:71), healing of our backslidings (Hos 2:6-7, 14), and the continual purging of sins (Isa 27:9; Zec 13:9; Joh 15:2); and then say "*Is not the faithfulness of God gloriously displayed?*"

The Philistines could not understand Samson's riddle, how, "Meat could come out of the eater, and sweetness out of the strong" (Jdg 14:14). As little can the

world comprehend the fruitfulness of the Christian's trials; how his gracious Lord sweetens to him the bitter waters of Marah (see Exo 15:23-25), and makes the cross not so much the punishment as the remedy of sin. He finds therefore no inclination, and he feels that he has no interest in having any change made in the Lord's appointments, revolting as they may be to the flesh. He readily acknowledges that His merciful designs could not have been accomplished in any other way. *While under trials many sweet tokens of love are vouchsafed, which, under circumstances of outward prosperity, could not have been received with the same gratitude and delight.*

You that are living at ease in the indulgence of what this poor world can afford, how little does the Christian envy your portion! How surely in some future day will you be taught by experience to envy his! The world's riches are daily becoming poorer, and its pleasures more tasteless; and what will they be, and how will they appear, when eternity is at hand! Whereas affliction is the special token of our Father's love (Heb 12:6; Rev 3:19), conformity to the image of Jesus, and preparation for His service and kingdom. It is the only blessing that the Lord gives, without requiring us to ask for it. We receive it, therefore, as promised, not as threatened; and when the "peaceable fruits of righteousness," which it worketh in God's time and way, spring up in our hearts, humbly and gratefully will we acknowledge the *righteousness of his judgments, and the faithfulness of his corrections.*

"Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb 12:11). "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom 5:3-5).

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